

Pyrenees 2010 Unfinished Business.

Thanks to Mike for the Travel Report.

The Pyrenees 2010 trip came about due to being snowed out in 2009. The 2009 trip took 18 months to plan and unfortunately we could not experience the routes we had planned hence the decision was made to return in 2010 and live the experience. Mark took full responsibility for researching all the routes and plotting the GPS co – ordinates as we were going to take a slightly different route this year and attempt an east to west crossing as opposed to a west to east crossing in 2009.

(Post update this route is proving to be very beneficial with travelling with a family as it gives a bit for everybody The wife has her shopping and sightseeing and it also entertains a 13 year old as he gets to get out the vehicle on a regular basis.)

Leeds to St Amand Montrond.

Friday 23rd June the morning was pretty much dictated by getting the animals into the kennels and packing the last of the Kit into the vehicle. The wife was tasked with delivering the animals and collecting the foreign exchange for the trip. I had the enjoyable task of playing with the truck and all the equipment. We managed to get on the road for 14:30 and headed down towards Dover. We knew it would be a long haul and had booked a B&B in Dover. We booked a room at Blakes B&B of Dover. We arrived 11:30 that evening where we met the proprietors the venue was fantastic with a quaint cellar bar and beer garden. The cellar bar was divine and reeked of fish and chips as the chippy next door was delivering for the guests. It was a quick bite to eat for the junior member of the party while mom and dad had a quick beer then retired to bed as we had a 3:00 am start for the 04:00 am ferry the following morning. The ferry was delayed due to Technical reasons what these were we never did find out. We eventually boarded the ferry an hour later and set sail for Calais. We made good time and the captain spared no time in making up the time we had lost. The only downside was crashing into the French dock which was quiet amusing, however no damage done and we all carried on.



We got straight on the road from Calais and got a good 2 hours under our belt before we stopped for a quick bite to eat and comfort break. We arrived at St Amand Montrond late that afternoon after being on the road for 7 hours. We set up camp and tested the routine as this would set the format for the next 14 evenings. We purchased local food that evening and had the most amazing sausages and sosaties done on the Braai a few did however decide to commit Hari Kiri and jump off the Braai.

The sausages were absolute heaven and all went down a treat, all washed down with a couple of glasses of Baywood it was early to bed for an early start the next morning. Mark had been on the road since 10:00 pm Friday evening and it was a miracle he was still standing.

St Amand Montrond to Carcassone.

Mark was first to rise the following morning but unfortunately the family were absolutely exhausted with the distance and time spent travelling the previous day. A decision was made to go our separate ways with Mark leaving about an hour before us and we would then catch him up on the motorway as we could cruise at a slightly higher speed and close the gap over the distance we had to cover. As the saying goes the best laid plans, this all went horribly wrong, after checking sat navs Mark got on route and left myself to raise the family and start the chase. We had however made a fundamental mistake the one sat nav was set for shortest distance and the other for quickest route.



We soon realised our mistake when we starting seeing different signs to that, that we were expecting a text from Mark 1 hour ahead confirmed this as he was seeing signs for Montpellier and we were seeing signs for Toulouse. Too late we realised our mistake and that the sat nav was doing a half circle sweep to Carcassonne via Tulle, Montauban and Toulouse while Mark's had taken him straight down on the A75 over the Millau viaduct. To say it was homer Simpson moment would be an understatement however we were committed and had to push to meet Mark that evening as he had booked in and had informed us the campsite was filling quickly and they would not allow him to book for us. We decided to sacrifice economy and at the expense of one tank of petrol we made Carcassonne for 16:30 that evening a total of 5 hours driving not bad for that route. We managed to get two pitches fairly close together and after setting up camp we met up and opened the obligatory wine again. We decided to go into Carcassonne that evening where the good lady could do some shopping and we could carry on sampling the fair. We walked from the campsite along the canal into the city and arrived a short time later. The meal was absolutely exquisite we had a steak, duck Cassoulet and burger for the little one. Desert was Profito rolls and Bailey coffees. This was followed by some more shopping and a night cap we found a sign for a bar that was just a small wooden door in the wall. We went through to be met by the most amazing courtyard with decked walkways on different levels and palm trees. We had one last drink and slowly wandered back along the well lit

towpath to the camp. Not before we discovered some self cleaning loo's which in our slightly inebriated state caused great merriment.



Carcassonne to Andorra.

We headed for Andorra fairly early the following morning but not too early mainly thanks to the previous evenings merriment. The weather was not ideal for travelling and was foggy and cold most of the trip up and over the mountains. We were going to make this day a shopping day as we were taking the smugglers route out early the following morning. The shopping trip was okay however as per our previous visits we did find Andorra very expensive. Not everybody's cup of tea but we found a shop that retails animal skins in aid of conservation this was quiet interesting for a look around. That evening there was a fireworks display that literally shook the tents; we initially thought they were blasting the rock face as they were doing some road repairs on the way down. However it turned out to a spectacular show as only the Andorrans can do.



The next morning we were all up early as there was a mixture of excitement and trepidation at what lay ahead. The drive up to start of the route was easy and we bumped into an Andorran registered Toyota and D3 who were also off to do the route. The route was spectacular with the most amazing views, the village of Tor was a little oasis with a nice

little taverna the most amazing collection of dogs and facilities that could best be described as rustic. We continued on down the route making our way to Sort.



Sort to El Pont De Suert.

We arrived at Sort late that afternoon and tried to get in for some white water rafting unfortunately we were too late and had just missed the last trip. We set up the Braai and had a quick bite to eat checked e mails and retired to bed for the evening.

The following morning we left the camp set up and decided to do a quick lane from Baen to Noves de Segre. The start of the route had us thinking that it would not be very good however this soon changed as we climbed higher and higher into the mountains. We stumbled across an old Land rover parked up in a shed which judging by the amount of stuff packed around it had not been moved in a while. However all said and done it was in surprisingly good condition. We were just passed St Sebastian on a well made road when we were stopped by a construction crew and told we could go no further due to road repairs. We could however double back 2 kilometres to the fork for St Sebastian and go through the village which would drop us other side the roadworks. Unknown to us St Sebastian is an abandoned village so the road up to and from it was not used regularly. The road was a straight forward drive with an abandoned estate house and the village of St Sebastian. The big house as we called it was spectacular and although falling down still had a lot of its fixtures, the kitchen proved very interesting as it had a wooden bench against one wall that was very well worn from lots of use. One could not help wonder who had sat there how long ago and for what reason. Although the kitchen was abandoned one could still almost feel the bustle and hear the clank of pots, raised voices and laughter from a bygone era.



We passed through St Sebastian with only one hiccup the signboards to Taus which was one of the waypoints on the route had unexplainably been turned the other way leading us to a dead end on top of the mountain. We managed to turn the vehicle around and backtracked to the incorrect signage and ending up taking the right fork which dropped us back onto the main track just behind the construction crew.

We continued on and on exiting La Guardia de Ares we found ourselves back on relatively new tarmac which was a pity as this track was still showing as unmaded so a lot of the dirt track has been metalled.

The climb back to Sort involved climbing the Col del canto to 1750 meters then on again to 2437 meters. Base camp was reached 5 hours after departing that morning and we broke camp and headed onto El Pont de suert. It was a straight forward run in convoy and we arrived at El Pont de Suert late that afternoon.



El Pont de Suert to Ainsa.

We were due to spend two days in Ainsa and were looking forward to not having to break camp but have a base camp for a few days. We arrived at Ainsa later that day and set up camp so we could go explore the old medieval town of Ainsa. The town was pleasant but not as vibrant as Carcassonne.

On day two we left the family in camp to chill out and tan. The big kids then went out to do a track. We ended up on the circular route for the Ordesay Monte Perdido Parque Nacional. The HU-631 is made into a one way system during peak times and is a fabulous idea as you can really enjoy the scenery and not have to worry about oncoming traffic on narrow roads. We stopped and walked the gorge in the national park where we came across an old hermitage, and some really spectacular scenery. Lunch was at a small mountain restaurant after a rather good jammon and cheese sandwich we headed back on to the camp site.



We arrived back and promptly went for a swim as it had been in the high 30's for most of the day. We had a quick swim then headed on up to the restaurant for dinner. There was an international music festival on which we unfortunately were not aware of until it had begun, we were absolutely devastated that we had missed this as it was fantastic judging by what we could hear from the campsite, and this added a whole new perspective to the town. The young people who were attending the festival were polite and well behaved (a big contrast to the UK I am afraid to say).

Being a Spanish festival it only started at 10:30 in the evening, nothing will beat sitting in a chair with a glass of wine listening to the festival. It was still going strong at 04:30 and eventually wound down at about 06:00am. What a fantastic night.



Ainsa to Argeles Gazost.

We set off the next morning chasing the defender as we had given it a head start due to the passes we were going to be climbing that day. The route took the A38 out of Ainsa and through the tunnel d' Aragnouet- Biesta into France. We picked up the D918 just passed Arreau and followed the Tour De France route. We climbed the Col d'Aspin 1489 meters then onto the Col d' Tourmalet at 2115 meters. This was hard work in a vehicle never mind on a bicycle the drop offs were unbelievable and the thought of descending that pass on a bicycle gives one a whole new respect for the competitors.

There are few things in life that makes one nervous but the roads nearing the summit definitely tend to focus one's mind. Unforgettable views though.



Quiet by accident we stumbled across St Lary solane this epitomises what we were seeing throughout the trip, how the mountain ski villages transform themselves in summer from ski destinations to summer sport venues catering for walking, mountain biking and river rafting rivers permitting.

A spur of the moment decision to pull off the road into an available parking spot to visit the local market was unforgettable. We experienced a true French market the type that one reads about with fresh fruit, meat, antiques and leather work. Needless to say we did a bit of shopping, I Succumbed and bought enough pate' to sink a battle ship. (The wild Boar pate' is recommended with a good red.)

We arrived at the campsite that afternoon and after setting up camp we headed into Lourdes. A different experience in that it was unusual to see a whole city devoted to religion and every shop within it in some way involved.

It was quiet amazing being there and there was definitely something about the place. We were asked if we were going to do a procession up to the cave. Unfortunately we did not have enough time this time around but maybe next time.

Argeles – Gazost to Maulon Licharce

The plan was to get to the campsite early so we could secure a pitch as we were getting into the European holiday season we had come across sites that were filling up quickly. We managed to secure a site and unloaded the vehicles and headed for the gorges first on the list was Gorges de Kakouetta. We encountered an Amazonian type landscape with suspended walkways through the gorge. A truly unique experience and a sight which one would not expect to come across in Europe. As with all the other water sources throughout this trip the most amazing thing was the colour almost like a Topaz blue and this was evident wherever water pooled.



Maulon Licharce to Paulliac.

The homeward run had started with two days required to get through France the decision was made to start heading home. Mark was due to catch his ferry on Wednesday and we were going to break off and head for the west coast for a few days. We decided to knock this on the head and follow Mark up through France and head for home. This was due to the fact that we had done so much we were all experiencing information overload and forgetting what had happened and when. A sign of a good trip. (It had nothing to do with the volume of wine consumed.)

We arrived in the Bordeaux region and set up camp in Paulliac we did a few chateaux's and landed up a cave where we purchased a fantastic bottle of Margaux for our last night. We indulged ourselves for a while by perusing the 1000 euro plus bottles. I had forgotten about this side of the wine collectors market and it was good to see it was still as robust as ever. (I have since discovered that I cannot drink Margaux as it too acidic and results in instant heart burn, gutted.)

Paulliac was a wonderful estuary based little town that seemed to be particularly good at shrimping or was at one stage in their history. We decided to go into town for a meal that evening but ended up returning to camp unfed and disappointed. We are not quiet shore which was to blame if it was the lack of availability or the astronomically high prices in the one of the only three restaurants that were open. The other two were an ice cream parlour and a Hotel associated restaurant. The town was hard to grasp as there were a few new age travellers in town and although it was the start of the season the town was not particularly busy.

We had a pretty early night that night as we wanted to start heading north fairly early the next morning.



Paulliac to Sees

The 110 left earlier as the preferred route was the N10 we had decided to leave a bit later and take the toll road as we had used the N10 the previous day and were not comfortable with the volume of trucks on it.

We left about an hour after the 110 and were all so busy chatting and laughing in the vehicle that we just blindly followed the sat nav. We soon stopped laughing and chatting though when we arrived at the ferry port in le Verdon at the Point de Grave. The sat nav had sent us right out of Paulliac up the coast as opposed to left back down to Bordeaux and then up to Poitiers.

We initially did a u turn in order to avoid the ferry port but soon realised we had nowhere else to go we had literally driven to the end of the landmass, the next major landfall was

Royan off to the right or America straight in front of us albeit a few thousand miles across the ocean.

Our options were the following, hope the land Rover could swim, drive all the way back down to Bordeaux or board the ferry. We opted for the ferry crossing to Royan it was not bad at 32 Euros for 3 people and a motor vehicle and approximately 20 minutes to cross.

The route was Pauillac, Royan, Santes, Niort, Poitiers, Tours, Le Mans then Sees all on the A10 toll. We arrived an hour or so after the 110 set up camp. We cracked open the Margaux toasted the trip had a quick bite to eat then all retired early as the atmosphere was subdued due to a fantastic trip coming to an end.



Sees to Calais

We travelled up together the next morning the 250 miles were pretty uneventful besides having a fuel scare moment where we were not finding any service stations, we were starting to get a little nervous. However our minds were soon put at rest when we were pulled over by the customs officials and the vehicles searched. I am convinced they were Land Rover enthusiasts as they spent more time on the 110 checking everything and asking what it does and how it works. Completely ignoring the Disco. All was well and they confirmed there was a full motorway services just a few kilometres up the road wished us a safe trip and sent us on our way.

We arrived at Calais early and managed to get onto the 13:10 ferry. After docking in Dover and saying our goodbyes we headed our separate ways home across the UK.

The run to Yorkshire was uneventful, we got caught in the tail of the bad rain they had that afternoon. The trip up was dominated by where we were going on the next one.

Who Knows, all we do know is that this was a fantastic trip with, some great sights good food, good wine and good company. A big thank you must go to Mark for all the planning and research he put into the trip, creating a truly memorable adventure.

Pyrenees 2010 unfinished business truly finished. Now where did we put those maps?